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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [ET](#)
SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER MELES ON BALANCING AND
STRENGTHENING U.S. RELATIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi underscored to visiting Assistant Secretary Johnnie Carson on July 6 that Ethiopia welcomes a broad and balanced relationship that focuses not just on security but also encompasses economic development and political stability. As he commented to other senior U.S. officials, Meles stated that Ethiopia shares the same values and interests on democracy and human rights and common policy goals on development and security. Meles reiterated the need to correct problems which unnecessarily raise distrust in the relationship. He cited Ethiopia's inclusion with Sudan and Zimbabwe in the July 2008 omnibus appropriations bill requiring notification to Congress before disbursement of funds and other complaints as indicators of a changed and tougher stance on Ethiopia by the U.S. Meles argued that criticism of recently passed legislation on press, public financing of political parties, and civil society did not limit political space, but expanded democratic values in Ethiopia. He welcomed senior level meetings with the U.S. to define clearly the relationship and to resolve misunderstandings. End Summary.

TOWARD A MORE BALANCED RELATIONSHIP

¶2. (C) Assistant Secretary Carson and Prime Minister Meles discussed for over three hours on July 6 the need to develop a more balanced relationship which focuses not only on regional security concerns, but also on advancing shared objectives on development and political stability, including human rights and democratic values. But, misunderstandings stand in the way of developing a strong relationship. Meles described Ethiopia's belief that despite its commitment to form a more democratic country, Ethiopia is being treated more harshly than countries which do not advance democratic values. He listed several problems which, when taken together, convey a changed stance, a tougher approach toward Ethiopia by the U.S. Such indicators, if not addressed and resolved, will undercut the relationship, Meles argued.

¶3. (C) Meles raised, as an example, Ethiopia's inclusion among a list of countries like Sudan and Zimbabwe, in a brief paragraph in the 2008 appropriations bill requiring Congressional notification prior to disbursement of assistance. Other indicators of changed perceptions include the Department of State's annual Human Rights Report. He called the Report "inaccurate" and "misleading" and questioned why the Embassy and the Department could not work with the government to jointly investigate or monitor alleged

human rights abuses. To issue the report without first raising problems directly with the government to allow officials the opportunity to address complaints, investigate charges, and resolve valid human rights abuse claims does not contribute to confidence and trust in the relationship. The Prime Minister said the State Department's Human Rights Report allows other groups, like Human Rights Watch, to issue even harsher reports based solely on rumors, misinformation, and unsubstantiated complaints. Meles said that he understood the legal restrictions placed on the Embassy in sharing sensitive information with the government, but urged a more open discussion as a means to improve relations.

¶4. (C) Meles remarked that Ethiopia and the U.S. must dialogue on differing views on rebel groups, like the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). The Prime Minister cited past contacts with the group by the U.S. military, in its effort to enhance force protection for civil affairs teams working in the volatile Ogaden region near Somalia. Just as Ethiopia would not contact groups declared as insurgents or terrorists by the U.S., Meles questioned why the U.S. military and, most recently, the U.S. Congress, would speak with the ONLF, a declared insurgent group by Ethiopia. Meles offers as another indicator of a changed posture toward Ethiopia by the U.S. the refusal to sell night vision goggles to the Ethiopian military by the U.S. Further, this tension in the relationship was recently heightened by the passing to the U.S. and UK Embassies in private a copy of a draft antiterrorism law. A report was released by Human Rights Watch along with a very critical comment, shortly thereafter. The Ethiopian Government (GoE) believes that it was the U.S.

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and not the UK which released the report to Human Rights Watch. Meles said he was perplexed as to why the USG would release a document provided in strict confidence. Such treatment by the U.S. places relations with Ethiopia on an adversarial plain.

COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY

¶5. (C) On human rights and democracy, the Prime Minister said there are few developing countries more serious than Ethiopia about establishing democratic structures and protecting human rights. But, negative and false reports and criticism from the vocal Ethiopian diaspora in the U.S. creates a wrong perception of Ethiopia's record. Meles underscored that he recognized there is much more that Ethiopia must do as an evolving democracy and that his government is committed to democratization. Meles said he could not understand how countries like Eritrea, which has no commitment to democratic values and is a severe abuser of human rights, can escape U.S. Congressional scrutiny, yet Ethiopia is a target for criticism. Meles stressed that it is Ethiopia's choice to pursue democracy and it holds itself accountable to the high standards set for democratic states.

POLITICAL SPACE

¶6. (C) Meles said that criticism of laws passed since 2005 as restrictive of political space were unnecessary attacks by the Ethiopian diaspora and international NGO groups. He briefly commented that such laws, which include the Press Law, Electoral Law, Political Parties Registration Law, Charities and Societies Law, and the just passed Antiterrorism Law, did not limit political space, but clearly defined the limits of activities and protected rights. On the re-arrest of opposition leader Birukan Midekssa, Meles said he had no choice other than to uphold legal procedures. Meles said that Birtukan violated the terms of her pardon and release from prison two years ago. Despite criticism, if the Justice Ministry had not re-arrested Birtukan, then it would demonstrate a lack of commitment by the GoE to upholding the rule of law and democratic procedures. Meles reiterated his

belief that this was also an issue of sovereignty. There cannot be a law for the masses, but a separate law for Birtukan and others. All must comply with the constitution. Meles also added that he hopes the U.S. would give Ethiopia "space" to make mistakes and correct them for Ethiopia is still a developing democracy.

TOWARD ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

¶17. (C) Meles said he welcomed the recent visit of Deputy Secretary Lew and the U.S. commitment to advancing a new paradigm for assistance. Development aid over humanitarian assistance would help Ethiopia's economic development. But, Meles worried that, given the tougher U.S. approach to Ethiopia, that the U.S. Congress and Administration may place strict human rights and good governance conditions for disbursement of funds. Given the misperception of Ethiopia's human rights and democratic records, Meles expressed anxiety that Ethiopia would receive limited funding which would undercut its development program.

¶18. (C) Assistant Secretary Carson raised economic development and pressed the Prime Minister on the importance of opening the telecommunications, banking and insurance sectors to private enterprises. This will enhance foreign investment, resolve Ethiopia's chronic foreign exchange deficit, and improve its balance of payments problems. Meles did not directly address the closed sectors, but stressed his commitment to economic development as a cornerstone of his government's economic policy objectives.

CORRECTING MISPERCEPTIONS

¶19. (C) A/S Carson remarked that strong relations are defined by shared and common values on democracy, good governance, and human rights as well as on security and development goals. There are frictions in all relations, but such tension are discussion points, not defining points of the relationship, and the fundamental basis for relations remains

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strong. A/S Carson articulated human rights and good governance as cornerstone ideals for strong bilateral relations. He detailed how democracy and respect for human rights made countries and systems stronger. A/S Carson urged Meles to resolve the Birtukan case fairly in order to remove it as an irritant in the U.S.-Ethiopian relationship. A/S Carson praised the elections in Tanzania and Ghana, where POTUS will visit later this week. Finally, A/S Carson underscored the importance of political space to ease frustrations and enhance political dialogue. Meles expressed his understanding and support for A/S Carson's position. Meles also pressed for bilateral meetings between the U.S. and Ethiopia as essential to correct these differences and tensions, and to restore the mutual commitment by both countries to the bilateral relationship.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) While we have corrected Prime Minister Meles's misperceptions on night vision goggles and informed him of our efforts to discuss and correct problems noted in our human rights report, the continued raising of these issues underscore the anxiety by the Prime Minister and his government that the U.S. posture toward Ethiopia would become tougher or worse, and that the U.S. would not consider Ethiopia an important ally in the region. It is also clear that while Meles desires improved relations, he also wants to establish bilateral relations on his own terms in which the U.S. would give Ethiopia space as it advances human rights and democracy as well as economic development according to its own policy objectives. End Comment.

¶11. (U) A/S Carson cleared this message.
YAMAMOTO